

A DRAMATIC VISION: RUBENS'S *THE CROWNING OF SAINT CATHERINE*

Like a play or a film today, 17th-century Baroque art was often “staged” to create the maximum dramatic and emotional effect. Just as a director would, Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640) arranges all the elements—characters, costume and props, emotion, composition, and color—to tell a compelling story.

THE SCENE

Rubens's painting focuses on a vision experienced by Saint Catherine of Alexandria. She saw the infant Christ on his mother Mary's lap offering himself as Catherine's spiritual bridegroom. Traditionally represented by Christ placing a ring on Catherine's finger, Rubens creates his own version: Christ crowning Catherine with laurel to symbolize her purity and victory over the forces of evil.

THE CHARACTERS

Madonna and Child: the Virgin Mary is seated on an arbor-like throne in an enclosed garden (symbolic of her purity), the infant Jesus on her lap. She wears red to symbolize her suffering at the death of her son and blue for her role as Queen of Heaven.

Saint Catherine: Catherine of Alexandria, who lived in Egypt in the early 4th century, kneels before Mary and the Christ Child, holding the palm frond symbolic of martyrdom. According to legend, the intelligent, beautiful, and chaste Christian refused the romantic advances of the pagan Roman emperor, so he imprisoned her, sentencing her to die on a spiked wheel. When lightning miraculously struck the wheel (look for the cherub holding a bundle of glowing lightning bolts), Catherine was instead beheaded, becoming one of the Church's virgin martyrs.



Saint Apollonia: Like Catherine, Apollonia was a virgin martyr from Alexandria, Egypt, where she lived in the 3rd century. Seized during a violent demonstration against Christians, she was tortured by having her teeth shattered and pulled out (she is holding the iron pincers that did the job). Given the choice of denouncing God or being burned at the stake, she leaped onto the pyre.



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Crowning of Saint Catherine* (detail), oil on canvas, 1631 (1633?). Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey,



Saint Margaret: Wishing to preserve her chastity, Margaret of Antioch (3rd or 4th century) refused to marry a pagan official, who had her tortured and thrown into a dungeon. There, Satan in the form of a dragon swallowed her whole (she holds the dragon on a leash). The cross she held caused the dragon to burst open, and Margaret emerged unharmed. She was eventually beheaded.

THE STAR

Rubens's young bride Helena Fourment was probably the model for both Margaret and Catherine. Rubens painted numerous portraits of her—see Fig. 1 on the reverse—and used her as a model for many of his paintings. They were married in 1630, when he was 53 and she was 16, and had five children together before Rubens's death in 1640.



Detail of Fig 1 on reverse

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THE MOTIVATION

Rubens was one of the great artists of the Counter-Reformation—the Catholic Church’s answer to the Protestant Reformation, which criticized much of Catholic doctrine and practice. Recognizing the power of images to teach, provoke emotions, and inspire faith, the Church decreed that religious art should dramatize the beliefs and sacraments of Catholicism in a direct manner. Devotion to the saints and the Virgin Mary was especially emphasized.

Rubens’s painting was intended to make an immediate connection with its audience. Though the three saints lived in the early centuries of Christianity, Rubens depicts them as fashionable 17th-century women of the Antwerp court: figures in contemporary dress were less remote. The tenderness of the interactions—Catherine leaning her head on the Virgin’s knee, Mary gently securing her son on her lap, the gazes of Margaret and Apollonia—makes them seem more human and approachable.

THE VENUE

Rubens painted *The Crowning of Saint Catherine* for the now-destroyed Augustinian church in Mechelen (Malines), modern Belgium. Placed above the altar of Saint Barbara (another virgin martyr), the painting may have been part of an altarpiece ensemble that included a sculpture of her. The altarpiece would have been the focal point for devotion and prayer. Conflicting accounts regarding payments made to Rubens for the altarpiece date the painting to 1631 or possibly 1633.

THE ARTIST

By the 1630s, Rubens was the most famous painter in Europe, a member of the Spanish Governor’s court in Antwerp, and a special envoy to Philip IV, King of Spain. Charles I of England had even knighted him. He was in such demand that he employed a large workshop of assistants and collaborators (including the young Anthony van Dyck) in order to meet his obligations. Rubens provided drawings of figures, designs of compositions, and direct supervision to his assistants, often adding, finishing, or retouching elements before a painting could leave his shop. However, he made a clear distinction between paintings he had retouched and those that he had executed entirely himself.

The fluid way the paint was applied, the delicacy of the flesh tones, and other details have led experts to agree that *The Crowning of Saint Catherine* is by Rubens’s hand alone and perhaps the finest example of his work in the United States.

THE METHOD

In his paintings of the 1630s Rubens generally applied paint in thin, transparent layers, often adding pure pigments unmixed with other colors (like the vibrant red in this painting). This technique makes his colors seem to glow. He also painted opaque light colors over dark tones (“scumbling”) in some areas, creating a “hazy” effect (you can see it in the trellis at the top of the throne). Rapid, energetic brushstrokes, clearly visible up close, add vitality to the painting while softening the surfaces. Look for the trail of Rubens’s paintbrush—in the highlights of Catherine’s gown, for example—where you can follow long sweeps of paint ending in dabs of the tip of the brush.



Fig. 1. Rubens, *Rubens, His Wife Helena Fourment, and Their Son Peter Paul*, oil on wood panel, about 1639. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, in honor of Sir John Pope-Hennessy, 1981.238. All rights reserved. The Metropolitan Museum of Art